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SUBJECT: More Arrests Under Niger's Criminal Libel Laws

REF: Niamey 0192

¶1. On November 12, Nigerien authorities arrested Moussa Aksar, publication director for independent weekly newspaper "L'Evenement" and his assistant Sani Aboubacar following a complaint by Ibrahim Foukori, director of power company NIGELEC.

¶2. Foukori filed a criminal libel complaint against the two after an article appeared in "L'Evenement" concerning the death of the Dutch Honorary Consul, who died of cardiac arrest after an allegedly heated argument with Foukori in the NIGELEC director's office. The article also denounced what it described as Foukori's "illegal" hiring of a relative of President Tandja's chief of staff for a position at NIGELEC.

¶3. The hearing was scheduled for November 13, but has been continued until November 17 due to the absence of the plaintiff's lawyer. Meanwhile, Aksar and Aboubacar remain held in pre-trial custody at Niamey's main prison.

¶4. The journalists' defense attorney expressed surprise at the postponement, which he claims was completely unwarranted, and at the prosecutor's refusal to agree to conditional release.

¶5. Aksar and Aboubacar's detentions follow on the heels of the November 11, 2008 conviction of Alzouma Zakari, director of independent opposition paper "Opinions," after a criminal libel complaint by Niger's Interior Minister (reftel).

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